

A New England Night

WHAT BARRETT FOUND IN ARIZONA WHEN HE WENT THERE
IN QUEST OF HEALTH

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

THOUGH it seemed a far cry from selling automobile accessories in a New England city to lying with a broken leg in an Arizona cañon, Barrett's present predicament might have been traced to the excellent sales that he and his partner had made the year before—eighty-three hundred dollars net to each of them. That made him put on more steam, concentrate harder, for he was twenty-eight, and his fixed ambition was to be making ten thousand a year by the time he was thirty. A little speeding up by day, a little more taken on at night, and the goal was in sight.

Then pneumonia, a dirty stab in the back, and the doctor's inexorable verdict that he must live in the open for a few years, must seek sunshine and avoid the dour New England winters and indoor work. As yet the trouble was threatened, not actual. He was lucky not to have developed an active tubercular condition, only a general run-down state—poor resistance, nerves shot to pieces. It sounded "lucky"!

There's always one friend to whom one can spill over with a hard luck story. Two would be a needless luxury. In Barrett's case, he turned to his lifelong friend, Chase-Dull-Care Carroll, whose happy temperament had fastened his nickname on him. Barrett had written to Chase, and Chase had wired a prodigal telegram urging him to come at once to visit him at the Arizona border post where he was stationed.

"Mountains, space, air, sunshine, *ad infinitum*," the message said. "You've only seen a pale variety of sunshine. Come along and meet the real article!"

The excellent price at which Barrett sold his share of the business made him realize all the more keenly the promise of its fu-

ture. He was a man of few words and great capacity for work. To give it up made him feel as if he had suffered an amputation. He liked a tight, tidy office, furnace heat, and closed windows.

Perhaps his strongest sensation on reaching Arizona was that there was entirely too much outdoors in every direction. With all Chase's sunny optimism, he found it hard to lighten his friend's despondency.

It was the autumn tactical inspection, which meant that Chase was busy from reveille until retreat, so all he could do for Barrett was to leave him alone. The health seeker would lie for hours on a couch on the sunny porch, napping frequently, and then sleeping at night as he had not slept since he was a boy. Instead of a meal being a vexatious interruption in the busiest part of a day, it became an agreeable event, to which one looked forward and did ample justice. As the striker put it deferentially to Chase, a month later:

"The captain don't need to bother about trying to shoot quail for Mr. Barrett. He does very well by ham and eggs or a porterhouse, sir."

At first Barrett had felt too homesick for the purr of a high-powered car to accept Chase's invitation to use the Tin Camel as he liked.

"It's the only car with a gait," explained Chase breezily. "Has a gait exactly like a camel's, and makes a noise like a riot at a tinware auction!"

But when Barrett began to go out for frequent rides alone, the more he saw of the country, the more he felt the spell of its curious fascination, its austere beauty. He heard of a ranch which was offered for sale, and he decided to go to look at it. He told Chase that he would probably go on to Nogales and spend the night there.

He was so much pleased with his inspection of the ranch, so sure that it was a good buy at the figure named, and that with more capital invested in it there were big possibilities of development, that instead of going on to Nogales he had turned back to talk over the new venture with Chase.

Where all the roads looked so much alike, he had somehow made a wrong turn. As the way ahead grew steadily more rocky and difficult, he had climbed a hill to get his bearings. A still higher peak cut off the view, and he had started up its side when he had slipped on the loose rocks and fallen. When he had tried to crawl, to drag himself along the ground, covered with rocks, cactus, and every variety of *espiñas*, the intense pain in his leg made him fear that he would faint. At all hazards he must stay conscious.

He pulled out his watch again. An hour and forty minutes since he had slipped on the rocks—only that! He would see how long he could keep from looking at it again.

II

PERHAPS another hour had passed before Barrett heard the most musical and most welcome sound that had ever reached his ears—the sound of a human step, light but near.

He hallooed loudly. A boy with a gun appeared over the slope, stood still, and pointed the gun straight at him.

"Stop that, you young idiot!" shouted Barrett. "It might go off!"

"It *will* go off if you come a foot nearer," returned the owner of the gun coolly.

He saw that she was a girl, though the first glimpse of her, with her slouch hat, khaki breeches, dusty laced boots, and short bobbed hair, had for a moment led him to mistake her. Her khaki hunting coat, with its stained shoulder pad of sheepskin, hung slightly open, disclosing her cartridge vest with its rows of shells.

"I beg your pardon," said Barrett. "I thought you were a boy, from your somewhat casual manner of handling firearms. If I may again call attention to it, your gun is pointed straight at me. I have broken my leg stumbling on these d— I mean these loose rocks. If you will help me to my car, or go to the army post with a message for me, I will pay you handsomely for your trouble."

The young woman's gun had never swerved an inch.

"How do I know you've broken your leg?" she demanded.

In the entire course of his twenty-eight years, Barrett had never lost his temper so completely.

"How do you know? Because I tell you so, and I am not a liar! Nor am I a fool, to be sprawling in the midst of rocks and spikes and thorns for pure pleasure!"

"You may be pretending to be hurt, for all I know, and for all you've proved," returned the girl bluntly. "Very well—I'll take a chance on it. I'll send you help from our ranch, which is near. The post is thirty miles from here."

She backed off a few paces. Her tanned face was as stern as a young Diana's.

"If I hear a sound of your following me, I'll turn and shoot. I am a good shot. You have been warned, remember!"

"The damned little fool still doesn't believe my leg is broken," thought Barrett furiously.

It was intolerable to the city-bred man, it was more than flesh and blood could bear, to be left alone in that isolated cañon as the shadows lengthened. His voice sounded sharp and edged as he called after her:

"Come back! For God's sake don't leave me here! See, I'll stand up, to show you I can't!"

He made a desperate, absurd effort to stand on his one good leg, toppled over, and fell face downward. The faint he had dreaded became actual, although there was but a momentary loss of consciousness. However, he had convinced the girl, and she hurried to his aid. She took charge of the situation.

"It's getting late, and darkness falls quickly here. Put your arm around my shoulder. Use me as a crutch, you see. That's it! Hop. Hurts much? You're doing all right, but lean harder, and throw more weight on me. That's better! Rest. We'll have to rest every few minutes. Ready?"

So on—an interminable progress to the Tin Camel. Barrett was nearly exhausted, nearly spent, as she helped him into it.

"Now I'll have to go back to unloose my horse. It's not very far. I'll unsaddle him, and he'll find his way back to the ranch."

It seemed a long time to Barrett before he heard her light, quick step again. The car rattled and banged along the rocky road—the stony gully might be called a road as a matter of courtesy—and presently

swung into the highway. Once the girl stopped the car to examine the track of a heavy tire. Her face was grave and troubled, but she said nothing.

As they turned in at a cattle guard and neared a long, low adobe house, she spoke for the first time.

"This is our ranch," she said. "I'll go in and send my brother Jim to help you, in case you would like to rest a little before he takes you on to the post."

A few minutes later she came back alone. All the spring seemed gone from her.

"Jim isn't here. There's nobody but me. Ours is a one-man ranch, and the cowboys are only here for a round-up. I'll have to help you as I did before. Ease down, like that. Lean hard!"

They managed the slow and painful steps into the house. She assisted him to a couch and made him lie down.

"The first thing to do now is to get off your shoe and let me examine the place."

He rebelled violently.

"I prefer for that to wait until I can get to the post, to see the surgeon there."

Her eyes met his so soberly that he felt a chill of apprehension.

"I can't take you to the post to-night. It's over thirty miles from here—a bad ride at night, over rough roads, and with an injured man. It would be a risk to take you, even if I dared to leave the ranch, and I don't dare. I might come back to find it burned to the ground. All Jim's hard work—" She stopped short. "I can make a splint for your leg. Jim's was broken once, and I looked after him. Once I set a dog's leg."

A dog's leg! One might have choked such a girl with a right good will!

She removed his shoe and sock, and examined the swollen and purpling ankle with deft fingers.

"That's better than I hoped for. The smaller bone of the leg is broken above the ankle, so the big bone will act as a natural splint. I'm going to get a clean shingle and some bandages, and fix it up for to-night. To-morrow I can take you back to the post."

He watched her firm, capable hands as she put on the bandage, as skillfully and as impersonal as—as a veterinarian, he told himself.

"Now I must get you something to eat in a hurry. An omelette and some coffee?"

It was quickly made and brought to him

where he lay. The chill of lying so long on the ground had permeated to the bone and marrow. The hot, strong coffee gave him a new grip on himself.

"I—I have not thanked you," he began. The sudden consciousness of how he had failed in appreciation made him stiff and awkward. "I must have seemed horribly ungrateful!"

The girl considered it, her eyes fixed straight on his. They were as clear as brown topazes. Her brother always said that they were the color of a mountain lion's.

"Ungrateful? *Grouchy*, I'd say," she made frank rejoinder. "I suppose an Eastern man would naturally feel that way about an accident."

He could not repress the rejoinder:

"I suppose a Westerner would feel quite merry over a trifle like a broken leg!"

"He might feel glad it wasn't his neck," the girl returned easily. "One runs across a lot of accidents out here, and gets used to them."

"I have heard rumors of an occasional automobile accident east of the Mississippi," he said.

Her face lighted delightfully with her rather rare smile.

"Aren't Easterners funny? You won't even admit there could be more accidents out here! After all, I imagine there's very little difference between one part of the country and another," she said thoughtfully. "People are just folks wherever they chance to live, and so about the same things must happen to them."

It was his turn to smile.

"What a typical New England night we're having!"

She picked up a soft blanket and threw it over him.

"Will you try to go to sleep, since you feel so much at home?"

"At eight o'clock?" he fumed.

She made a sudden restless movement. To any one who knew her, it would have showed the nervous tension she was under, for she was accustomed to hold herself in steady control.

"You need sleep," she soothed, as if to an unreasonable child. "But talk, if you prefer."

So he asked the question uppermost in his mind:

"Is it possible that you are accustomed to stay alone at this isolated ranch?"

"No, of course not. I live here with my brother Jim. He married a year ago. Celia was a great friend of mine at school, and came out here to visit me. I went East to school—to Austin."

East to Texas!

"When I came in to-night, I found a note saying that Celia had been taken ill suddenly, and Jim was afraid it might be appendicitis, so he had hurried her off in the car to the hospital at Bisbee. Jim naturally thought I'd be quite safe here to-night, as nobody would know I was here alone. I'll sit here by the fire awhile. Let me know if you need anything."

Food and warmth had given Barrett a sense of drowsiness which was bliss after the pain and chill.

"You've always lived here? You like this country?"

"Like it! Why, I don't see how people stand living in cities! It would smother me to death. Every time I was on my way back from Austin—"

"The East," he corrected teasingly.

"I'd stay on the rear platform of the observation car all the time, recognizing my friends—mesquite waving to me, yuccas in bloom again, and century plants. Even the old gray sagebrush would seem as friendly as one's grandfather! I'd feel like calling to the tumbleweed, 'You little tramp, where are you blowing to now?' Or saying, 'Hello there, you fat barrel cactus!'"

The cactus was swelling, was growing bigger and bigger, was bursting open, and it was filled with warm air and funny butterflies. Barrett was sound asleep.

III

HE was awakened by a touch on his arm. He opened his eyes sleepily, and for a moment could not place himself in the low-raftered room, which somehow had an atmosphere of charm and home. Then he remembered. He was aware of a stabbing pain in his leg, and saw, to his amazement, that the girl was sitting before the fire, with her rifle across her lap. His sleepiness evaporated as if by magic, and he was wide awake.

"Listen!" She spoke in a low, concentrated tone. "I wanted you to get some sleep the first part of the night, so I didn't tell you we were in danger. I hated to arouse you, but I don't dare wait any longer. There's a man, Dick Bent, who owns a small copper mine just on the other side

of the border. He has been going back and forth across the border, smuggling tequila and mescal. He had a false bottom to his wagon, and put the stuff under the false bottom, with a load of ore on top. Nobody bothered to unload all the heavy ore, and he has been getting across with it for a year or more, making money hand over fist. He bought a big car and all that. Maybe the custom officials finally realized that he couldn't be making so much money out of low-grade ore, or maybe somebody informed on him; but anyhow, he was caught red-handed with the goods. He got off with a short sentence and a heavy fine. My brother had nothing to do with it, but Dick Bent believes it was Jim who informed on him. He swore that he'd get even with Jim when he got out of jail, if he had to burn the ranch down, and that he'd pay *me* back at the same time. He is a university graduate, and they say that he belongs to an old Maryland family, though he doesn't use the name, and that he drifted down to the border and went to the bad, drinking tequila and mescal. You know they say that if a man gets accustomed to tequila, it makes whisky taste like vanilla custard. His term must be out, for he has been here this afternoon; so he must know that Celia and Jim are away. First I saw that track in the road, which I thought was his big car, and then I saw his footprints in the 'dobe mud just this side of the cattle guard. I'd know his footprints anywhere—a narrow boot, no hobnails, and a long stride. He's handsome in an odd way, with his thick black hair and slanting gray eyes, and he's vain of it."

"Surprising in a man like that," suggested Barrett, trying to assume a casualness which he was far from feeling.

She considered it. She had a way of turning over a matter mentally before she expressed her opinion.

"No, I think not. I've known a few 'bad men,' as they are called. All of them were vain in one way or another. All of them boasted about something, whether it was the men they had killed, or the amount of liquor they could drink, or the women who were crazy over them. There was always a brag somewhere."

"And this man's?"

"Women. He thinks they all fall for him. He kept dogging me to marry him until Jim told him not to come around the ranch any more. When he was caught

bootlegging, and thought Jim had informed on him, he swore that he'd burn down this place as soon as he got out of jail, and that—that he'd have me in Mexico, begging him to marry me. He's a dead shot, lots better than I am. I'm pretty fair at game, but I've never shot at a person in my life, and of course it makes a difference. What sort of a shot are you?"

"I have never fired a gun in my life," returned the city man apologetically. "In my part of New England, hunting is a rich man's sport."

"Then will you do just exactly as I tell you? I've been doing a lot of thinking while you were asleep."

She propped up the pillows of Barrett's couch.

"Sit up and let me throw the blanket across your injured foot. You see, he must not guess that you are hurt. Take this pistol, and hold it so—see? But don't pull the trigger under any circumstances, unless I tell you. No, don't grip it as if it were trying to wriggle out of your hand. Hold it naturally."

Her face rippled with mirth.

"You don't have to press your lips tight together to hold a pistol. You look so—so *determined!*"

"That's an improvement over being grouchy," he reminded her.

She moved her footstool close to the couch and sat down, leaning slightly against his knee, but with her rifle across her lap.

"Now we're ready for him, though he's not likely to come until it's late enough for him not to meet anybody on the road out here. Don't you do anything or say anything. If you talk, you'll give him an opening. It's silent folks he doesn't understand. I'm going to pretend that you are my husband, that I married you in Austin, and that you've just turned up again. Then there will be two influences at work on him, unless he has been drinking too hard—he's a Catholic, and still has a sort of respect for marriage buried deep in him; and he's vain, and wouldn't want you to know that he wanted me himself."

"And if he has been drinking hard?" asked Barrett quietly.

He saw her control a shiver.

"Then I may have to shoot, but not until I've tried everything else. If there's shooting, he will get one of us, probably both. If he thought you were—were with me, and *not* my husband, he'd get you. I

wish I had left you in the cañon, where you would have been out of danger!"

"I am glad you didn't," he said with decision. "Don't be unhappy. Maybe he won't come."

She waited a long moment.

"He's outside," she whispered, her trained ear hearing stealthy sounds which Barrett could not detect.

She raised her voice a little. It sounded clear, contented, domestic.

"But Pete, turkeys do wonderfully well in Arizona," she said. "Why, they feed themselves on the grasshoppers, and even if coyotes got a few, it certainly would pay us to keep a—"

The door swung open.

A man stood there—rather a dandy, with his knotted handkerchief around his sunburnt throat, his polished black cowboy boots with the scalloped tops, his long silver spurs, his ivory and silver forty-five glistening in its holster. When he saw Barrett, for a moment his glance swerved in sheer astonishment, and his hand rested lightly on his hip.

"So there is a man to whom you aren't so damned particular?"

She did not lift her rifle. She looked fearlessly into Dick Bent's eyes.

"Meet my husband, Dick! You want to see Jim? He and Celia have gone to Bisbee. She's sick."

Her tone was neither conciliatory nor defiant—merely matter-of-fact.

"Husband!"

Dick Bent's sneer was contemptuous and threatening.

"I married him when I was in Austin, but I never did tell Jim. We didn't get on well together—he was so grouchy; but now he's come back, and I thought maybe we could make a start with turkeys. Know anybody who has some to sell?"

Dick was not drinking. To the contrary, he was cold sober. He had planned a long drive into Mexico, and he wanted to keep his head clear, for he had not meant to go alone. Somehow it didn't seem plausible to abduct a girl who was simply wishing to buy some turkeys, nor to shoot at the gaping dumb-bell she had married.

He looked Barrett over insolently with his slanting eyes.

"If I ever saw a buzzard with a white liver, it's the choice object you're tied up with! Sell him turkeys? Why, a young turkey would freeze to death looking at that

frozen face! You don't seem to trust each other a damned sight, each of you swinging to his gun. Put 'em up!" he commanded harshly.

Barrett, struggling to maintain his self-control, pulled the trigger of his pistol unaware. It seemed to him that it went off with a deafening noise. For a moment he felt that he must have killed both girl and intruder with one fell shot. From an immeasurable distance he heard her chiding:

"Pete, don't you do that again! He was just trying to show off to you, Dick, that he could pick the flower out of that china vase on the mantel."

No less surprising to the girl than the report of the pistol had been to the man was the sound of a burst of laughter.

"Showing off his gunfire to me! Shot the hell out of a vase, did he? Why, that bimbo couldn't hit a bull with a bass fiddle! When his pistol went off, and he nearly jumped out of his skin, and flung his arm straight up in the air, I suppose he was aiming at a fly on the ceiling! Maybe he was shooting a feather from an angel's wing! And to think of you falling for a gun-shy deaf mute!"

The girl seized the advantage of his mood of laughter, sardonic though it was.

"Dick, you thought Jim peached on you. On my word of honor he didn't. Jim's no sneak." She played her last card. "Besides, it would have been low in Jim to tell on you when you wanted to marry his sister."

"I wanted to marry you!" he cried, outraged, stung. "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last skirt in the world! The sort of man you want is this hencoop helper that you picked up riding the zebra in a merry-go-round!"

As he turned to Barrett, the veneer of the later years seemed to drop from him. For a moment there flashed a glimpse of the proud arrogance of his youth.

"My congratulations, Grouch! You'll find this fair *señorita* as sexless as a sycamore sapling! When I choose a woman, she won't spend the first evening she has

been with me in a year discussing the economics of poultry raising!"

Still resting his hand lightly on his hip, he backed out of the door into the night. Presently they heard the purr of his car, headed toward Mexico.

IV

THE girl's whole body was shaken by a violent fit of trembling.

"Thank God I didn't have to shoot! I'd rather die than kill anybody; and if he had shot you, I should have felt like a murderer."

Involuntarily, because it seemed the most natural thing in the entire universe, Barrett put his arm around her quivering body.

"You've been through everything, dear! You're the most wonderful girl I ever saw in my life—the bravest, the best sport. You could teach a man to love this country, to find his place in it, to do a man's work here. You are so fine and so true—"

"True?" she cried. "True, when I lied like that? And I've always prided myself on telling the straight truth."

"Please God, part of what you said was a prophecy, not a lie. You must go to sleep now. It's striking midnight, and—"

To his extreme annoyance, his speech was cut short by a sneeze.

She spoke without considering it.

"I wonder which day it is when the clock is striking midnight! You know the old saying:

"Sneeze on Monday, sneeze for danger;
Sneeze on Tuesday, kiss a stranger.

"You've already had the danger—"

She broke off, and a warm flush stole under her tan. He bent over her, and somewhere against the brown bobbed hair there passed the breath of a kiss.

"But you're not a stranger!" His voice was ringing, triumphant. "I'll know you better than I know any girl in the world—as soon as you tell me your name!"

His own name seemed to be immaterial, for the girl he married six months later always called him "Pete."